

Punctuating Dialogue and Direct Quotations: A Dozen Rules

1. Use quotation marks to begin and end a direct quotation. Separate the quoted material from the dialogue tag by commas. Do not use quotation marks to set off an indirect quotation.

I said, "The fable by James Thurber will surprise you."

I said that the fable by James Thurber would surprise you.

2. If a question mark or an exclamation point occurs where one of the separating commas should be used, omit the comma and use the question mark or exclamation point to separate the quoted material.

"Don't be late!" Bill warned.

3. The speaker's words are set off from the rest of the sentence with quotation marks, and the first word of the quotation is capitalized. When the end of the quotation is also the end of the sentence, the period falls inside the quotation marks.

He said, "We'll discuss the fable in one hour."

4. Both parts of a divided quotation are enclosed in quotation marks. The first word of the second part is not capitalized unless it begins a new sentence.

"This fable," our teacher said, "is a twist of an old tale."

5. When writing only a part of a quoted sentence, do not begin the quotation with a capital letter unless the person you are quoting capitalized it or it is the first word in your sentence.

A film critic has called the movie "a futile attempt by the director to trade in his reputation as a creator of blockbusters" (Anderson 74).

6. Quotes within quotes: If you need to have one character directly quoting another character, then use double quotes for your main dialogue and single quotes for the quote-within-a-quote.

"And then he said, 'Mind your own business.' The nerve!" she said.

7. MSF rules

- a. Periods and commas ALWAYS go inside quotation marks.

"I think you're wrong," Dan said.

- b. Colons and semicolons ALWAYS go outside quotation marks.

Dan said, "I think you're wrong"; he was asking us to re-examine our information.

- c. Question marks and exclamation marks go EITHER inside or outside the quotation mark depending on the situation. They go inside when the question or exclamation is part of what is quoted.

She asked, "Who did it?" or *Did she say, "I'm quitting"?*

- d. When the sentence, as well as the quotation at the end of the sentence, needs a question mark (or an exclamation point), use only ONE question mark (or exclamation point), and place it inside the closing quotation marks.

Did she ask, "Is this fair?"

If you are questioning an exclamation, do it like this:

Is it true he yelled, "No!"?

8. When you write dialogue, begin a new paragraph whenever the speaker changes.

"Videotape is the wave of the future," declared Clarissa. "There's no doubt about it! Not only is it a popular medium for today's artists, but it has practical applications as well."

"You're right," Angela agreed. "Video has been a boon to us on the swimming team—even when we don't like what we see! When we see ourselves on tape, however, we see immediately where our shortcomings are: a kick that's uneven or too much time lost at the turn."

"I work with emotionally disturbed children," mused Carmen, "and, now that you mention it, perhaps videotaping the teachers at work would be helpful. It would give us a chance to study our interaction with the children and see where we might improve or change our approach."

"Well, I guess we have our work cut out for us," Clarissa said. "If we all become masters of the video camera, we'll be on the road to success."

9. Use a pair of dashes to indicate an abrupt break in thought or speech or an unfinished statement or question.

"First of all," he said, "if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—"

"Sir?"

"—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

- 10. If you have the same speaker saying things that are separated by descriptive passages, you may choose to keep everything in one paragraph or separate parts into their own paragraphs. Make this decision using the same criteria you would use in deciding to start a new paragraph without dialogue. In other words, if you have more than one topic, give each its own paragraph. Just make sure it is clear that the dialogue belongs to the same speaker.**

“If I didn’t go to school tomorrow, you’d force me to.”

“Let us leave it at this,” said Atticus dryly. “You, Miss Scout Finch, are of the common folk. You must obey the law.” He said that the Ewells were members of an exclusive society made up of Ewells. In certain circumstances the common folk judiciously allowed them certain privileges by the simple method of becoming blind to some of the Ewells’ activities. They didn’t have to go to school, for one thing. Another thing, Mr. Bob Ewell, Burris’s father, was permitted to hunt and trap out of season.

“Atticus, that’s bad.” I said. In Maycomb County, hunting out of season was a misdemeanor at law, a capital felony in the eyes of the populace.

- 11. Sometimes, one speaker’s words run for more than one paragraph. When this happens, use quotation marks at the beginning of the quotation, at the beginning of each subsequent paragraph, and at the end of the whole quotation.**

“I read a spell-binding mystery yesterday,” Agnes said. “It gripped me on the first page, and I couldn’t put the book down until I had finished.

“The plot is simple, almost classic. Five people are sitting in a room watching home movies. When the lights come on, one of the people is dead. Who did it? How was it done?

“Of course, no one has entered or left the room during the movies; thus, one of the other four people in the room has done it. I, of course, thought of poison—but that was wrong.

“Well, the detective arrives, and the questioning begins. As the story unfolds, you learn that everyone has a motive. The plot thickens. The mystery isn’t solved until the last page, and it had me fooled. Whew! I’m exhausted from the suspense!”

- 12. ELLIPSIS POINTS: Use three spaced ellipsis points (. . .) to indicate a pause in written dialogue. Ex. “Well, . . . I don’t know,” Sarah answered. When someone’s words “trail off,” you also use 3 ellipsis points. (Be sure to space in between each one.) If the ellipsis points appear at the end of a sentence, you will need a fourth “dot” for the sentence period.**

“Mr. Ewell shouldn’t do that—”

“Of course, he shouldn’t, but he’ll never change his ways. Are you going to take out your disapproval on his children?”

“No, sir,” I murmured and made a final stand: “But if I keep on goin’ to school, we can’t ever read any more. . . .”

“That’s really bothering you, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.”

When Atticus looked down at me, I saw the expression on his face that always made me expect something. “Do you know what a compromise is?” he asked.